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Contingency and Plasticity: The Dialectical Reconstruction of the Concept of Home in Forced Displacement

Sana Murrani

Abstract

The loss of home as a consequence of war, conflict and displacement urges us to question the concept's very construction. Although existing spatial and cultural studies on the subject have explored the immaterial characteristics of the construct, they have overlooked its connection to the consciousness and agency of the displaced, which are quintessentially contingent. This article presents a theoretical inquiry into the influence of the processual ambiguity of our cognitive system on the positioning of the concept of home between the temporality of its construct and the plasticity of its agency. Using connections between cognitive plasticity (based on Catherine Malabou's concept of the freedom of the brain) and spatial plasticity (influenced by Vilém Flusser's notion of the freedom of the migrant and the construction of the concepts of home), it establishes that the plasticity of migrants' agency in displacement is an instrumental process in encoding new spatial practices of home-making.

Keywords

home, diaspora space, displacement, cognitive plasticity, collective agency, contingency

Introduction: the construct of home as a concept of displacement

In recent years, a steep increase in migration has brought the subjects of home and displacement – and their interpretation – to the fore within multiple disciplines across the fields of geography, anthropology, sociology and creative arts (McLeman & Gemenne, 2018; Boccagni, 2017; Ahmed et al., 2003). The armed conflicts in the Middle East and Africa alone have contributed significantly to the rise in the numbers of those who have been internally or externally displaced. Many millions throughout the world have lost their homes, communities and sense of belonging in their flight from acute conditions of urbicide within their cities and across their nations. For such people, the loss of home is not only material and physical, but also conceptual and nostalgic: the notions of home and of spaces of belonging are reconstituted as sites of memory and are evoked by the nostalgia (Blunt, 2003) for the past that the displaced carry with them into the future across seas and borders on their transnational journeys. This article is triggered by the sense of loss to home and homeland that forcibly displaced people feel in diaspora. In its homage to this loss, the article embarks on a theoretical investigation that unthreads the tangled concept of home from its traditional definition as rootedness in place and re-weaves its relationship with identity and consciousness in order to arrive at a reconsideration of home as a multidimensional (Mallett, 2003), edgeless notion that operates in contingent and transnational spaces that are always in the process of inhabitation (Ahmed, 1999). It is important to assert here the relevance of the term space to the multidimensionality and edgelessness of the concept of home as opposed to its association with place in the tangible, geographic and grounded sense of the word.

The proposition that the idea of home in diaspora transcends fixity and rootedness in place, and steps into the territories of contingency, temporality and displacement in space and time, renders it a contested space as well as a contested concept. Research on contested spaces and their de-territorialisation and decoupling from fixed beliefs is connected to, if not directly influenced by, the wealth of studies on the associations between the construct of home (and homeland) and its attachment to place, a sense of continuity and the act of reclaiming place, as well as to home-making practices (Brun & Fabos, 2015; Brickell, 2012). In their investigation into what they term “transnational homes”, Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling (2006) reiterate the tension in the

relationship between migrants and their homes that Nadjé Al-Ali and Khalid Koser (2002) have identified as the quintessential characteristic of transnational migration and diasporic home-making (Al-Ali & Koser, 2002).

Blunt and Dowling (2006) emphasise two contradictory yet vital dialectical processes that are based on the notions of *roots* and *routes*. While the former term is associated with the fixity of place and origins, the latter focuses on mobility and on the multiplicity of transnational geographies of home (Blunt & Dowling, 2006, 1999). These authors adopt Avtar Brah's concept of diaspora (1996), as it offers a multifaceted critique of the discourse of fixed origins (Brah, 1996, p. 16). Indeed, Brah's understanding of the term was given new currency at the beginning of the twenty-first century with the construction of displacement and diaspora as concepts arising from the subtext of the term *home*. Brah argues for a "homing desire" rather than a "desire for a homeland", a fundamental distinction that emphasises the difference between an ideology of "return" and one of "home-making" (Brah, 1996, p. 193). She stresses that the concepts of diaspora and borders are enmeshed with the politics of location and dislocation, and that the idea of a "diaspora space" emerges from their intersectionality. According to Brah, a diaspora space is one where the global conditions of culture, economics and politics manifest themselves as "sites of migrancy" that disturb and problematize the position of the native and indigenous (Brah, 1996, pp. 181-182). Thus, sites of migrancy, diaspora space and transnational geographies of home are genealogically entwined with the expressions and representations of contested spaces. As a space, home is a contested notion for migrant and native alike; as a concept, it is both a mythical place of the diasporic imagination (Brah, 1996) and a lived and practiced experience of locality. Hence, by nature, home embodies ephemeral and temporal – as well as concrete – attributes.

The postmodernist critiques of the 1980s and 1990s, which emerged at the cusp of globalisation studies, challenged the pre-assumed belief that home is bound to and rooted in place, and demanded for the concept of home to be de-territorialised in order to emphasise its multidimensional attributes (Malkki, 1992). This deconstructivist re-evaluation shifted the definition of home as a *location* identifiable geographically to that of a *network* in which sites, fields and locales are part of a repositioned web of relations which continuously transform, enact, appropriate and practice global

processes (Kokot, 2006). This opened the way for the de-(re)territorialization of home as a space and a new understanding of its intrinsic interconnectedness that has meant that its construct is no longer perceived as bound to fixed places (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992).

In this article, I draw on the philosophy of Vilém Flusser (2003), which emphasises the contingency and the transcendence of notions of home and fixed urban spaces (Flusser, 2003, p. 3). Flusser (2005) uses communication theory to harness the power of the contested agency of the migrant, and asserts their potential to discover a sense of freedom in lost connections (particularly the sense of a lost home) and form new relationships with contested spaces. He does so by employing a dialectical approach, describing cities as dialectical structures or networks of intersubjective fields of relations and underlining the efficacy of collective memory in establishing the basis of cultures (Flusser, 2005, p. 322). He further postulates, that the image of the city gains its contours when the self becomes an abstraction, allowing the connections and relations between multiple selves (collective agency) to emerge as what is truly material and concrete (Flusser, 2005, p. 326).

In describing displaced people drifting between one part of the world and another as *migrants* as opposed to *outsiders*, Flusser (2005) foregrounds these figures as vanguards of the future. He speaks of the idea of home and homeland (*Heimat* in German) as the rootedness and enmeshment that clouds our ability to see reality more clearly. According to Flusser (2003), to be free, in the philosophical sense, is to be able to navigate and weave new relationships through channels of communication that are not pre-imposed, to be unsettled and always seeking the challenge of new enmeshments (Flusser, 2003, pp. 6-15). What Flusser was trying to convey is this self-felt freedom in the contingent moment when the migrant is starting anew without pre-prejudices or pre-conception about who s/he was in the world. Yet the migrant remains burdened with labels of who they will become in the new world. Being settled and unsettled are human conditions that have co-existed throughout history; Flusser believes that, unlike plants, animals and humans are truly rootless, alluding to what he describes as the defining point of Aristotelean philosophy: *unsettledness* (Flusser, 2003, p. 25). This article unpacks the entanglement of preconceived understandings of being rooted in space with the contingency of the construct of home, particularly for those who are displaced and

dealing with the memory of transnational geographies of home. Although we must not overlook the way in which the trauma of war and disaster can inhibit an individual's agency and sense of efficacy, research in the field of ecological psychology has shown that recovery from trauma (Harvey, 1991) is possible, without clinical intervention, through the collective agency of communities (Bandura, 1999). Posttraumatic growth, where positive psychological changes in one's behaviour and a more creative outlook to future encounters and experiences can result from adverse challenges to one's life, is evident in psychological research (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Flusser's thinking about the empowered migrant who is uprooted and displaced is a manifestation of posttraumatic growth.

The article explores the power of such collective agency to transcend fixed constructs of home and homeland, and concrete understandings of their spatial and social existence, and shows how cognitive plasticity plays a vital role in shifting the focus of discourse (and particularly spatial practice) from the concrete and tangible onto collective agency and consciousness. The genealogy of the construct of home is thus clearly related to unfixed and contingent interpretations; however, in order to fully utilise its benefits, we need a clearer understanding of the conditions in which this contingency operates, and this requires us to first explore the ways in which constructs are manifested cognitively.

The ambiguity and contingency of constructs

Flusser (2003) identifies three phases in the process of expulsion from a familiar place of existence: the first relates to a sense of uprootedness and displacement from familiar reality; the second exposes the unreality of the "void" (that is, of existing in a liminal state of drifting); and the third is emplacement in what he refers to as an "unacceptable second-degree reality" (Flusser, 2003, p. 25). In order to emphasise the seemingly inherent ambiguity in the construction of different realities, we need to unravel the ways in which the cognitive system constructs realities in terms of spatial and social relations. There is always considerable ambiguity in the things we encounter, view and experience in everyday life, whether real or imagined, physical or social, spatial or cultural. Spatially, this consideration of ambiguous reality does not negate the existence

of the different types of space or *topoi* in which everyday reality is enacted. In the chapter on “Levels of Reality and Analysis” (in his *Writings on Cities*), Henri Lefebvre (1996) distinguishes between *isotopies* (spaces of order and authority such as governmental and religious buildings), *heterotopies* (spaces of difference and ambiguity such as housing, not to be confused with Foucault’s *heterotopias*) and *utopias* (spaces of consciousness and the imagined). Yet Lefebvre asserts that these levels are far from pure; they are in fact highly ambiguous, with oppositions emerging directly from the everyday overlaps between the levels of reality in these spaces – for example, between the *isotopy* and *heterotopy* of social vs owner-occupied housing (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 113). This section focuses on the main characteristics and collective nature of the levels of reality in which the concept of home is manifested.

Seeing and interpreting are not only actions but also forms of criticism that constantly construct different versions of worlds and of reality. It is paramount here to highlight the use of the phrase *versions of worlds* rather than the simple term, *world*. This article employs the former for an epistemological rather than an etymological reason, following the lead of Heinz von Foerster (2003), a pioneer of second-order cybernetics, who has advanced an epistemological explanation of how reality is constructed. Von Foerster postulates that “the environment as we perceive it is our invention” (Von Foerster, 2003, p. 213). He explains how *comprehension* functions by defining the context and seizing the *interpretations* of different actions through perception, and asserts cognitive processes are “never-ending recursive processes of computation”, meaning descriptions of reality (Von Foerster, 2003, p. 217). Reality is not created out of one person’s imagination but from collective and relational interpretations that form the basis for the construct of *community* (this finding affirms the idea of the enmeshment of communication that Flusser speaks of). Thus, in order to create a reality, the actions, interpretations and observations of the creative agency must be part of the constructed system, and these agents must be conscious of their participation in the making of their reality (Goodman, 1978, p. 6). Moreover, cognition is built on the collective interpretations, correlations and descriptions of versions of reality, not on one reality or *the* reality. I will revisit the concept of collective agency in the article’s final section.

This poststructuralist and social constructivist view of the world argues that everything is constructed, relative and relational, but also (more importantly) multiple and inevitably ambiguous. Victor Turner (1967) advances a theory of *liminality* that is built on the rejection of dualisms and dichotomies, which distils the focus on the tangential issue of ambiguity. Liminality sits on the margins and in between the three successive, yet separate, stages of ritual in the rite to passage: separation, margin and aggregation. The middle stage – the margin or *limen* – was later developed into the “liminal period” of “betwixt and between” (Turner, 1967). Turner is referring here to the anthropological connotations of the term “liminal” in a societal context as meaning “in between states of being” where he defines liminality as “a stage of reflection” (Turner, 1967, pp. 93-111). Indeed, one of the central terms that Turner (1977) identifies as characterising liminality is *reflection* (or *reflective*), a term that can also be found in von Foerster’s account of cognition. The other elemental term used by both scholars is *social* or *societal change*. These two main terms, *reflective* and *societal*, imply a perennial process of unfolding and making: the conceptualisation of space appears to be processual, or as Turner defines it, “an endless series of negotiations among actors about the assignment of meaning to the acts in which they jointly participate” (Turner, 1977, p. 63).

Turner’s findings are echoed by anthropologist Sally Falk Moore (1975) who proposes that the essential principle of the quality of social life is nothing less than absolute indeterminacy. Moore argues that the patterns of culture and social life are built on the indeterminacies of *incompleteness* and *temporality*, which “contain elements of inconsistency, ambiguity, discontinuity, contradiction, paradox, and conflict” (Moore, 1975, p. 223). This is certainly true of any complex system such as the cognitive system. In explaining the pivotal point of development in the field of cultural psychology over the past three decades, Jaan Valsiner (2012) argues that the move from understanding culture as a generic term that focuses on human behaviour to a term that captures the complexity of human lives, has had a significant impact on the development of the field of psychology which simultaneously began to emphasise the importance of the psychological dynamics of heterogeneity over homogenization of its discipline’s innovative perspectives (Valsiner, 2012, p. 5-6). In cultural terms, being processual requires what Moore refers to as “processes of situational adjustments” (Moore, 1975, p. 234), which she defines as a state of being in which people are in constant

negotiations with and adjustment to the world. This means that the fundamental characteristics of Moore's process theory (1975) are instability and ambiguity. In this, it is akin to the theory of liminality situated between the oscillating processes of ambiguous stability and change. Transient ambiguity is a quintessential characteristic of the making of space and culture, and above all, of the construction of a reality, with all its manifestations of home, home-making and agency.

The processual indeterminacies of the cognitive system in representing realities, coupled with the collective power of the enmeshments of communication in the interpretation of *topoi* and social constructs, contribute to the complexity of the contingency of any construct in everyday life in which home is quintessentially a representation of quotidian space and time. This continual, contingent spatial construction is a significant product of the process of cultural forms. It confirms that concepts of home are not static, neither do they have a centralised structure of communication; rather, they are relational and relative, cyclic and open-ended, as both our conscious and subconscious interpretations and material/immaterial encounters with space and society change over time. Hence, our construct of reality is fundamentally ambiguous. To harness a deeper comprehension of this contingency, however, we need to better understand the plasticity of the brain in relation to concepts of spatial manifestations such as the urban and the idea of home and home-making.

The plasticity of the brain and the concept of 'the urban'

In *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, Catherine Malabou (2008) constructs a philosophical narrative explaining the meaning of *plasticity*, a concept that dominates the fields of neuroscience and critical theory alike. Malabou dwells on the contingent characteristic of plasticity as a condition situated between two extremes: at one end it represents the capacity of the acts of making and creating to both receive form (for example, in clay) and give form (for example, through plastic surgery), and at the other it represents the annihilation of its own creation. I draw on Malabou's dialectical plasticity as it echoes Flusser's description of dialectical beings and agency. Malabou (2008) elaborates on the contingent nature of plasticity when describing the brain: "[T]o talk about the plasticity of the brain means to see in it not only the creator and receiver of form but also an agency of disobedience to every constituted form, a refusal to submit to a model" (Malabou, 2008, pp. 5-6). This resistance of the brain to taking any one

form is the very essence of its plasticity, but should not be confused with flexibility or elasticity, as these conditions imply a reactive rather than a proactive or active agency within the brain and/or environment. Malabou references Karl Marx, who attributed the process of making and shaping history to the unconscious activity of human beings (Marx, 1971, p. 245-46). Malabou regards this as an awakening to a consciousness of historicity, an understanding commensurate with her endeavour to *implicate* rather than *explain* consciousness (Malabou, 2008, p. 11) in terms of the functioning of the brain. Implicating consciousness is not simply a matter of revealing the extent of the brain's plasticity, but of freeing the study of the brain from the presuppositions that have engaged neuroscience in what Malabou refers to as "the entire field of politics" that has implicitly governed the subject (Malabou, 2008, p. 11).

Flusser (2003) embeds consciousness in the dialectical relationship expressed in his own apprehension of home. He describes the house he has built for himself in Robion in France, associating it with all that is familiar (or *inside*) – from the disorder of his books and papers within the house to the village beyond its walls that he has become so accustomed to. Beyond the village lies the unfamiliar (or *outside*), and this stretches as far as the rest of the world and even the rest of the universe. The familiar takes on other attributes, not just material and spatial but also the memory of a lost *Heimat*, as well as history and prehistory, while the future and the unknown contribute to the unfamiliar. Flusser asserts that consciousness is the dynamic of this dialectical relationship between the familiar and unfamiliar (Flusser, 2003, p. 12). If the familiar is always represented by the means to dwell, then to be without dwelling entails confronting the loss of that dialectical relationship. Yet the very loss of *Heimat* could be the trigger that awakens the consciousness to a new enmeshment of communication and to the mental freedom of the migrant that both Malabou (2008) and Flusser (2003) allude to.

Flusser's house and his relationship to the concept of *Heimat* are, in a sense, representations of Malabou's plasticity of the brain. Flusser applies the freedom he sees inherent in the condition of the migrant to the way he imagines cities and particularly urban existence. He speaks of *telematic* cities, as opposed to Roland Barthes's idea of cities as discourse. Rather than focusing on its geographical, architectural and physical manifestation in the form of buildings and systems of transport and infrastructure,

Flusser sees the city as a “wave-trough” of communication – “an intersubjective field of relations” between individuals – that transcends the divide between private and public, existing solely as a net of relations with myriad threads and knots (Flusser, 2005, p. 326). In the *Oxford Handbook of Culture and Psychology*, Valsiner (2012) characterizes the discipline of Psychology as heterogeneous with multifaceted connections made to the notion of culture. He asserts that this perspective can be traced back to the globalising movement of people in the 1990s which he terms as “cultural others” (Valsiner, 2012, p. 4). He further emphasises the importance of understanding migrating people as a crucial task for the development of cultural psychology, where he states: “The hybrid trajectory of self-willed movement – the pilgrimage – is a cultural phenomenon that dynamically unites the otherwise static rural-urban, religious-secular, and nomadic-sedentary oppositions. The pilgrim’s path is not geographic but psychological” (Valsiner, 2012, p. 17). Valsiner’s thinking is in line with Flusser’s concepts of cities as “wave-trough” in that both draw on the importance of the convergence between culture and psychology manifested beyond the geography of space fixity.

In this new theory of urbanism, Flusser (2005) emphasises the dialectical structures of communication between individuals that fundamentally depend on a reciprocal understanding of identities and differences. His utopian image of the city provides the prerequisites for reaching beyond its physical manifestations; however, he falls short of defining the conditions by which this image can be sustained and the city itself not only re-imagined but remade. The concept of the urban as a fixed and bounded territory or settlement has also been repeatedly challenged by theorists such as Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift (2002), and later by Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid (2015), to name but a few. Amin and Thrift (2002) assert that cities are neither static geographies, nor can their subjects, processes and networks of dialectical structures be easily summoned into being as a whole (Amin & Thrift, 2002). Lefebvre (1970/2003) states that the plasticity of the term “urban” is embedded in its characteristic of being located at the conjuncture of networks of production of space and society, thus inferring that any point in this network can become the centre of urban space-time (Lefebvre, 1970/2003, p. 116).

While Turner's and Moore's processual indeterminacies (discussed in the previous section) pivoted on ambiguity as the principal characteristic of the creation of social and cultural forms, Lefebvre (1996), two decades later, asserted that the analysis of urban phenomena and spatial existence (physical and social morphologies) is also built around terms and concepts (such as text, context, system, institution, signified and signifier, language and metalanguage) that are primarily ambiguous and contain multiple meanings (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 111). This ambiguity was defined in spatial terms at the beginning of the twenty-first century as Thrift (2009) set out to describe the relational temporality of the meaning of space to its four kinds of constructs: "empirical, block, image and place" (Thrift, 2009, p. 105). He argues that however different they may be in their construction, all four types of spatial construct share a common ground in which space is no longer treated as a container where things are situated and enacted, but as an agent and "a co-product of those proceedings" (Thrift, 2009, p. 96) assuming space possess an agency equal to that of humans. Thrift explains that embodiments in place are driven by connections and interactions between the body and space and manifested through spatial affects (Thrift, 2009, p. 103). He postulates that spatial awareness is an integral part of the interaction between embodiments and affects:

"For places not only offer resources of many different kinds (for example, spatial layouts which may allow certain kinds of interaction rather than others) but they also provide cues to memory and behaviour. In a very real sense, places are a part of the interaction" (Thrift, 2009, p. 103).

Lefebvre (1970/2003) proposes a relationship between the concepts of the city and the urban, in which the city is a creative hub comprising the activity, consumption and production of urban society. However, the urban could emerge from anywhere where space is practiced, appropriated and reproduced, and where the urban field becomes a manifestation of urban thought and a reflection of urban society, but not necessarily of urbanism.

Lefebvre's notion of the urban is made manifest in Edward Soja's idea of a *thirdspace* (1996) ("a space of radical openness") and Rob Shields's *margin* (Shields, 1991) (culturally and socially on the periphery), revealing that it is a malleable concept. This plasticity disrupts urban and social centres in pursuit of a "radical creative space"

(where consciousness is rooted in identity and the experience of everyday life rather than in any given place) (Soja, 1996, p. 99). This precise difference in the way rootedness is conceived facilitates spatial and temporal alterations in the lived experiences of home-making and the spatial practices of the displaced. Displaced space and diaspora space become one radical creative space in which the plasticity of the brain and the agency of the migrant coalesce to create new transnational homes, urban centres and spatial practices.

Collective agency in displacement

Displacement realises the unequal power relation between the migrant as the *other* and those who are settled and rooted; it also brings to the fore the struggle between agency and structure. Yet this very tension gives rise to the migrant's agency, in the first instant as a survival mechanism and later as a creative form of expression that challenges hegemonic understandings of territory, belonging and existing political structures. However, it only does so because of the implications of the differences between the familiar and unfamiliar, free will and structure, settledness and unsettledness in the way in which the concept of home is constructed and re-made in diaspora space. Displaced agency, however, is a descent into the ordinary as opposed to a rebellion against authority – Veena Das (2007) gives examples of squatting and vernacular living, in which ordinary life is reclaimed through home-making (Das, 2007, p. 7). While Anthony Giddens describes agency as the 'manifestation of an organism' who possesses a body and is able to intervene in his/her environment (Giddens, 1987, p. 216), Albert Bandura (1999) reminds us that human agency does not operate in isolation from social conditions, political control and institutional structures, and is therefore bounded by imposed limits (Bandura, 1999). Hence, this section emphasises the contingent nature of the agency of the migrant/displaced, which is similar to that of the spaces they encounter and negotiate as part of this dialectical relationship – that is, as part of a process that both inhibits and facilitates home-making practices.

According to Giorgio Agamben, during the Second World War, Hannah Arendt proposed a paradigm for a "new historical consciousness" (Agamben, 2000, p. 161), in which traumatic events impact on migrants' (and refugees') consciousness, forcing them not only to respond to but also to actively engage in the process of navigating

through space, spatial problem-solving and home-(re)making on a daily basis. The contested agency of the migrant has not lost its currency since Arendt advanced her proposition over seventy-five years ago; in fact, it arises today with as great an urgency due to the significant rise in the numbers of displaced people across the world and the complexity of their networks of displacement (internally and externally). Agamben (1995) reminds us of the enmeshment between the agency of the displaced and the diaspora spaces in which this agency is situated, developed and, more importantly, understood: “It is only in a land where the spaces of states will have been perforated and topologically deformed, and the citizen will have learned to acknowledge the refugee that he himself is, that man’s political survival today is imaginable” (Agamben, 1995, p. 119).

In his social cognitive theory of agency, Bandura (1999) describes a triadic gradation in the environment, created out of its interactions with human agency, which is far from monolithic. This environment has three types of structure: the imposed, the selected and the constructed. Moving from one to another requires an increasing level of personal agency (Bandura, 1999, p. 23). It is vital to connect Bandura’s triadic gradation to Lefebvre’s spatial model (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 38-39) of lived, perceived and conceived space since they both break the binary logic of agency-structure and introduce a dialectical model of “othering”, or as Soja describes it, a critical “thirding-as-othering” (Soja, 1996, p. 60-61).

The importance of the field of cognition lies in its emphasis on the collectivity and the plasticity of the dialectical relationship between human existence and the surrounding environment, allowing for mutability, adaptability and reformation in response to experiences in the environment over time. Furthermore, cognitive plasticity, which manifests itself in adaptive patterns of change in cognitive behaviour (Greenwood & Parasuraman, 2010), provides an acknowledgment of the agency of the environment, recalling Thrift’s agency of *things* (2009), in which space becomes the co-producer of experience alongside the collective agency of others. Here, we find a clear emphasis on the equal partnership between self and space in the co-production of agency. Plasticity further provides a lens through which research on generations of diasporic home-making practices reveals a collective toolkit for the design of diaspora space, sites of migrancy and the re-making the concept of home.

Conclusion

Collectivity is thus the essence of cognitive plasticity. In the same way as Malabou described the sense of a conscious awakening to the brain's ability to shape history, the nondeterministic dialecticism of our cognitive system and of social and spatial environments encourages an awareness of the "freedom of the brain" to make its own history – a historicity of possibilities (Malabou, 2008, p. 13) – which gives rise in turn to different, contested spatial practices of home-making, urban integration and social existence. It is worth mentioning that even though human agency is traditionally and theoretically referred to as individual agency, social cognitive theory accentuates the fact that individuals cannot operate in isolation from one another, and therefore human agency is by default a collective agency. Furthermore, the strength of a group's efficacy is a clear sign of its enhanced capabilities and performance (Bandura, 1999, p. 34), acting as a crucial ingredient in the realisation of collective agency. Nevertheless, there is no denying the essential existence of heterogeneity within collective agency, which operates across all levels of dialectical interactions within the triadic spatial and social environments (referred to above) that both Bandura (1999) and Lefebvre (1991) highlight.

The processual indeterminacies of our cognitive system as it interprets realities, and the indeterminacies of transnational and diasporic home-making practices, simultaneously initiate a contingent dialectical genealogy of the meanings of home, diaspora space and transnational geographies. This dialectical contingency allows a philosophical discussion to emerge around the idea of the plasticity of the brain put forward by Malabou, in relation to the freedom of the migrant proposed by Flusser. It also facilitates the imposition of the triadic propositions advanced by the three philosophers and theorists mentioned here who straddle the fields of communication theory, urban theory and social cognitive theory: together Flusser's three phases of unsettled realities, Lefebvre's spatial triad and levels of reality, and Bandura's triadic gradation of human agency emphasise Soja's concept of the 'thirding as othering'. The act of *thirding*, or adding a third process, layer or gradient, is not simply to break down binary effects but to shift the focus from dialogic arguments into the area of nondeterministic possibilities. These new possibilities have spatial and social dimensions; they comprise the dialectical contestations of everyday space and time and within that the concept of home.

Flusser reminds us that if deprived of the means to dwell, we are confronted with the loss of *Heimat*, the elemental and quintessential characteristic that divides the familiar from the unfamiliar, out of which the dialectical relationship of communication is born. This dialectic challenge of the loss of *Heimat*, faced by the displaced in diaspora, stimulates the emergence of new patterns of creative thinking that are specific to home-making practices. Thus displacement, as a condition, empowers the displaced through necessitating the renewal and re-emergence of new relationships of communication for the concept of home and home-making practices in diaspora.

Underpinned by a theoretical and philosophical discussion stemming from the fields of geography, anthropology and urban studies, this article therefore sheds light on the tense relationship between the displaced and their feelings of a lost home. By de-territorialising the concept of home, uprooting it from space and rooting it instead in consciousness and agency, the constructs of home and home-making practices become edgeless notions that operate beyond spatial fixity, in contingent, transnational, contested spaces. Untangling the concept of home from space and coupling it with the collective efficacy of the displaced empowers the sense of free agency whose existence has been revealed by both Malabou and Flusser.

This article has integrated the work of Malabou and Flusser. In so doing, it has provided a unique way of thinking about new constructs of diaspora space and home (particularly through the diasporic practices of home-making shaped by cognitive plasticity), which transcends the material habitation of home and focuses instead on the freedom of the brain, consciousness and agency. This shift towards considering the fields of spatial practice – architecture, urban studies, geography – as semi-hardwired material and immaterial dialectical processes could have a significant impact on the ways in which home, or any other manifestation of space is, in future, theorised, analysed, made and contested.

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Notes

1. The term ‘dialectical’ denotes a process of evolution in time and space. This distinguishes ‘dialectic’ from ‘dialogism’, which implies an oscillating process occurring, but not necessarily evolving, in time and space.

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